

2025-2026 TUOLUMNE COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

Detention Facilities Report

June 10, 2026



SUMMARY

California Penal Code 919(b) requires the grand jury to inquire into the condition and management of “public prisons” within the county. “Public prisons” is not defined in the Penal Code; however, it is generally accepted by grand juries across the state that a public prison is a state operated adult correctional facility. Most grand juries also inquire into county and city jails.

The 2025-2026 Grand Jury toured:

- Dambacher Detention Center
- Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility
- Sierra Conservation Center

All personnel encountered supported the Grand Jury’s investigation. They spent time responding to questions and escorting Grand Jurors wherever requested, and ensured requested records were provided in a timely manner. The Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility is fairly new and still appears to be in excellent condition. The Grand Jury was impressed with the dedication of the staff from all three facilities. Staff appeared to provide quality care for their residents in all situations. All staff were familiar with and able to explain safety procedures designed to protect the wellbeing of the residents of each facility. On the day of the tour at the Sierra Conservation Center, it was raining heavily, allowing the Grand Jury the opportunity to discover a handful of indoor areas with water leaking from the ceilings. The Grand Jury was able to speak with several inmates at the Dambacher Detention Center. Several female inmates revealed that it was very difficult to get up and down from the top bunk bed. A review of Title 24 determined that the bunk beds have been installed to code.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury do not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

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GLOSSARY

BSCC	California Board of State and Community Corrections
CALCTRA	California Correctional Training and Rehabilitation Authority
CALPIA	California Prison Industry Authority
CAMP	Steps to Success Camp Program
CCHCS	California Corrections Health Care Services
CCR	California Code of Regulations
CDCR	California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation
CO	Correctional Officer
DDC	Dambacher Detention Center
FOAC	Friends of the Animal Community
IEP	Individualized Education Program
GEO	Corporation that works with and within detention facilities to provide rehabilitation programs for individuals in custody and post-release
MLRJDF	Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility
PUPP	Prisoners Uniting People & Puppies
SCC	Sierra Conservation Center
SYT	Secure Youth Track
5150	California legal code authorizing an involuntary hold for 72 hours for psychiatric evaluation

METHODOLOGY

An in-depth tour was completed for each facility, during which your Grand Jury interviewed administrators, staff, and inmates wherever possible.

- MLRJDF tour – October 29, 2025
- DDC tour – October 29, 2025
- SCC tour – November 5, 2025

Follow up interviews were held with nine DDC inmates on December 19, 2025. Four male and five female inmates were interviewed. Days in custody of the inmates interviewed ranged from 14 to 1,993 days. Some had been detained in a safety cell. Many had jobs, including the on-site kitchen, laundry facilities, and animal control off-site. All inmates were asked the same questions designed to gain a greater understanding of the conditions and treatment within the facility.

The following documentation was also reviewed:

- 2019 MLRJDF Policy and Procedure Manual
- 2023 Tuolumne County Sheriff's Office Custody Manual
- 2025-2026 BSCC Comprehensive Inspection, Welfare & Institutions Penal Code Sections 209 & 885, Tuolumne County Probation Department Detention Facilities (MLRJDF)
- 2025-2026 BSCC Comprehensive Inspection, Penal Code Sec 6031, Welfare & Institutions Code Section 209, Tuolumne County Sheriff's Office Detention Facilities (DDC)
- CCR Title 15 – Crime Prevention and Corrections
- CCR Title 24, Part Two, Section 1231 – Minimum Standards for Adult Detention Facilities
- 2024-2025 Tuolumne County Civil Grand Jury Detention Facilities Reports
- MLRJDF website
- DDC website
- SCC website
- Complaints submitted to the Grand Jury

DISCUSSION

MOTHER LODER REGIONAL JUVENILE DETENTION FACILITY

Mission Statement:

The mission of the Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility is to provide for the safe and supportive detention of youth requiring secure rehabilitative services. It is guided by the belief that high risk youth are capable of changing negative patterns of conduct through active participation in evidenced-based and best practices programs empirically proven to promote positive change. In furtherance of this mission, youth detained at the Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, to reside in a safe and secure environment, to receive fair and consistent treatment, and to participate in all available programs intended to foster physical, moral, emotional and intellectual growth. Further, the Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility is committed to providing a safe work environment for staff, in addition to abiding by case and statutory law, and meeting all standards set forth within the California Code of Regulations, Title 15, for the care of youth in secure detention.¹

Facility Overview

The MLRJDF is operated by the Tuolumne County Probation Department, and is currently overseen by Chief Probation Officer Dan Hawks, who was part of the team that met with the Grand Jury. The MLRJDF is located at 12784 Justice Center Drive, Sonora, CA 95370.

The MLRJDF was built with special grant monies with the intention of being a regional youth facility, meaning the facility would be utilized only by rural counties within California, similar to Tuolumne County. These counties pay for bed space, whether the bed is filled or not. Facility administrators can fill the beds slated for other counties, but if the outside Counties need the bed space, the youths would potentially be transferred to other facilities.

The youths housed in the co-ed facility are generally between ages 12-25. At the time of our tour the age range was 14-20. Due to changes to the California juvenile justice system, youths that could have been tried as adults and who would have previously gone into state custody are now being kept in local custody under the Secure Youth Track (SYT). Under this program, these “realigned” youths could stay in local custody until the age of 25. The facility

¹Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility. Tuolumne County Government. 4 April 2026. Web. <https://www.tuolumnecounty.ca.gov/910/Mother-Lode-Regional-Juvenile-Detention>

administrators typically try to house the SYT youth in separate groups from the rest of the population, as space allows. At the time of the tour there was one 20-year-old individual who had been at the facility for four years. The non-SYT youth are in what was called the CAMP program. The average stay is approximately 90 days for CAMP youth but is three to four years for those on the SYT.

At the time of the tour there were 20 youths housed at the facility, 75% of whom have an IEP. The facility employs a teaching staff of 3, as well as additional staff for IEP needs. They also have an on-site, school-based counselor. The facility offers several educational programs (including cooking/home economics and time with local Master Gardeners), but availability of those programs relies heavily on volunteers. Your Grand Jury was especially impressed with the outdoor facilities, which included a koi pond (grant-funded construction), well maintained grass, and a vegetable garden. Daily outdoor time is mandatory, weather permitting. These outdoor facilities are all maintained by the youth, with support from the local Master Gardeners. Staff also stated they tried raising chickens to utilize the fresh eggs. All these activities encourage participation in the rehabilitation process and foster a sense of community for those in the facility.

During intake, which can take up to 3 hours, the youth are subjected to various tests to ascertain what they require from an educational and rehabilitative perspective to be successful during and after their stay. Both GEO and Mental Health of Tuolumne County assist with the intake to ensure they have a valid case plan for each youth. Every youth is required to participate in these services. This plan also engages the family to enable the youth to succeed during their incarceration and upon release afterwards. The family can visit in-person once a week. Staff stated they would like to have family visitations more often but are unable to accommodate them due to staff scheduling issues; however, they allow family visits twice a week remotely. During their stay, every youth is constantly re-evaluated and re-assessed. The results of these assessments are used to potentially adjust the proposed release date and develop the transition plan for release. The assessments evaluate in-house behavior and familial involvement.

All youths must also be medically cleared at intake; no drugs or alcohol within the last 24 hours. If either are found, the youth are transferred to the hospital. For ongoing medical issues, MLRJDF staff are only allowed to administer over the counter drugs. If additional medication is required, they must go to the hospital. Youth are seen at Adventist Health Sonora whenever possible but could be taken out of the county if specialized care is required.

The youths have a point system for managing discipline issues, which was built by examining programs utilized by other facilities and taking the best aspects of each. These points not only enable them to buy items from the commissary, but they also encourage pro-social behavior and aid in all aspects of their discharge planning. They start earning points as early as intake. When asked about the recidivism rate since utilizing this newly created points system, staff felt it had a positive impact but stated that the data was limited only to those youths that stay in Tuolumne County after their release.

Searches are conducted for contraband via a body scanner (purchased through a grant), room searches, K9 perimeter monitoring, pat downs, and visual searches. Supervision is accomplished both in-person and via cameras set up throughout the facility to ensure no fraternization or other inappropriate behavior occurs.

The facility was designed to accommodate future expansion for additional housing facilities if needed. It is financially self-sustaining due to the annual contracts with other rural counties through contracted bed costs. These rates have been static since the facility opened, but staff stated that the rates would increase during the next contracting period. The facility is also now eligible to bill MediCal for their services.

MLRJDF administrators note that staffing is one of their greatest challenges; vacancies for Correctional Officers are especially hard to fill. As of the day of the tour, they were not fully staffed. It takes six to eight weeks before a CO new hire is considered trained, but six to nine months before the new hire can be left unsupervised. Therefore, the existing staff perform extensive amounts of overtime.

The California BSCC inspects the MLRJDF every 2 years; the results of the latest inspection had just been received at the time of the tour. The MLRJDF was in compliance with all Title 15 and 24 standards of the California Code of Regulations.

FINDINGS

None.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None.

COMMENDATIONS

C1. The MLRJDF was well-designed, in good repair, and appeared to be well-run.

C2. Safety of the youths and staff is always the highest priority, and the facility administrators were also very cost-focused and always thinking about the well-being and rehabilitation of the youths.

C3. Despite inconsistent staffing levels and fluctuating availability of volunteers, the MLRDJF staff provide a safe, educational, and positive environment that focuses on personal growth, achievement, and rehabilitation for their charges.

DAMBACHER DETENTION CENTER

The DDC is operated by the Tuolumne County Sheriff's Department and is currently overseen by Sheriff David Vasquez, who was a part of the team that met with the Grand Jury. DDC is located at 12915 Justice Center Drive, Sonora, CA 95370. The facility opened in 2021 and has a max capacity of 230 inmates, both male and female. As of the tour date, 136 inmates were residing in the facility: 3 were in isolation and 1 was medically quarantined.

Due to the grant funding used for the construction of the facility, the State of California owns the bond to the building. While owning the bond, the State can and does, limit what can be done with the building. Once the County takes ownership of the bond, changes could be made to how the building is used and designed. For example, dispatch staff and equipment could be brought into the building, or enhancements could be made to visitation rooms.

Every inmate is given a tablet to access educational services and legal search engines, as well as to communicate with family. Behind a paywall, tablets can be used to play games, listen to music, and watch movies. They are also able to place phone calls and send texts with their tablet, if they have the funds to do so. Their tablet access is limited to 5:00 A.M. to 11:00 P.M. The inmates are individually responsible for charging and maintaining them. The day before the tour, DDC was transitioning to a new tablet vendor with different programming options and fee schedules.

Inmates also have access to medical and dental services during their incarceration. There are on-site medical personnel to meet these needs. When the in-house medical team is unable to meet the inmate's needs, they are transferred to the local hospital, along with a minimum of two jail guards.

During the follow up DCC inmate interviews, several female inmates voiced concern about the ability to climb onto the top bunks in their rooms. Your Grand Jury confirmed that the bunks were built in accordance with Title 24 (Building Standards Code) and Title 15 (Minimum Standards for Local Detention Facilities). It is important to note that the facility is NOT allowed to provide any additional equipment to access the top bunks per these Titles. However, there are no pegs, rungs, or ladders incorporated into the metal bed frame, so inmates assigned to the top bunks use a plastic chair as a step ladder to access the top bunk (if the guards allow it). However, they stated these chairs aren't sturdy enough to support the full weight of an adult. Some inmates choose to bring their mattress to the floor (if guards allow it), rather than try to climb onto the top bunk. Slips and falls during attempts to get to an assigned top bunk have resulted in bruising and could potentially be considered a health and safety concern.

Regarding behavioral health programs, there are many offered at DDC, such as Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Celebrate Recovery. However, space is limited for these programs, and many inmates reported not being able to attend programs as often as they would like to get the help and support they need. Some inmates even stated they would "go 5150" just to be able to speak with a behavioral health professional.

All the inmates made complaints about the food, saying that it was often undercooked and still partially frozen inside. In some cases, it was also overcooked. The complaints were more focused on the dinner meals over breakfast and lunch. Many inmates stated they would skip meals or eat in the kitchen (in the case of food workers) to avoid eating the dinner provided. Staff explained that there are strict dietary standards outlined in Title 15 that must be followed.

Many inmates were unhappy with the new tablets that were rolled out two months prior to the interview. They stated that there were less programs available, non-educational or non-religious items now cost more, and anything they had bought with the old tablets was unable to be transferred to the new ones. Previously, religious shows were available for free while other programs must be purchased, but now those cost money too. The inmates were also not happy with the physical tablet; describing them as being of "Temu" quality.

Lockdowns were also reported to be somewhat frequent (weekly). However, they were typically for a short duration and associated with times when the COs are short staffed, such as when some were called away for an inmate medical emergency or during a shift change. However, the female inmates reported having to wait for several hours in the hallway to be dressed down due to a shortage of female COs to do pat downs. Lockdowns due to fighting among inmates were reported to be uncommon.

FINDINGS

None.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None.

COMMENDATIONS

C4. Several inmates were quick to provide commendations for many of the COs. Most felt that the COs and staff treated them in a professional, impartial, and courteous manner.

SIERRA CONSERVATION CENTER

SCC is operated by the California Department of Corrections and is currently overseen by Acting Warden Joshua Prudhel. SCC is located at 5100 O'Byrnes Ferry Road, Jamestown, CA 95327. The primary mission of SCC is to provide rehabilitative services for low and medium custody inmates, with emphasis on training eligible inmates on wildland firefighting techniques through the Wildland Fire Training Center (hereby referred to as "Fire Camp" or "Fire Program").

SCC contains three separate facilities, A-C. Facility A and B house the low-risk inmates, with the inmates participating in Fire Camp housed in Facility A. Facility C contains the medium-risk inmates. All three facilities were toured by the Grand Jury, with the opportunity to speak with inmates throughout the day.

The primary mission of the Fire Camp is to support state, local, and federal government agencies as they respond to emergencies including fires, floods, and other natural disasters. Additionally, hand crews (which are made up of 17 inmates) respond to rescue efforts in local parks or flood suppression. Eligibility for the program is extremely strict: inmates must be recommended for the program, cannot be a sex offender, must be physically fit, and must be a low flight risk. Benefits of the program for inmates include the ability to earn minimum wage, time off their sentence, and various levels of expungement of their criminal record.

The SCC staff are proud of the work that the inmates are doing to support their communities and how they are building skills in a career that they can utilize upon their release. Therefore, the standards and expectations for the inmates that go through the fire camp program are extremely high. There are no recorded escapes from the fire camps. However, a single incident involving drugs will lead to immediate expulsion from the program. As an example, the day prior to the Grand Jury's tour, there were six instances of an overdose at the fire camp. The inmates overdosed on "paper" (paper dosed in drugs such as fentanyl, ketamine, spice, horse tranquilizer, etc.). All six inmates were expelled from the program. On a related note, the single fatality reported at SCC was due to an overdose.

CDCR partnered with California Correctional Health Care Services (CCHCS) to exercise the California Model to transform the correctional landscape for their employees and the incarcerated. The California Model is a "systemwide change that leverages national and international best practices to address longstanding challenges related to incarceration and institution working conditions, by creating a safe, professional and satisfying workplace for both staff and inmates. Additionally, the California Model improves the success of the decarcerated through robust re-entry efforts back into the community." By implementing positive programs and fostering collaboration between staff and inmates, CDCR aims to create a violence- and trauma-free environment, believing in the potential for redemption and the importance of inclusivity in decision-making.

Through partnership with CALCTRA, formerly CALPIA, SCC offers eligible inmates additional vocational opportunities in construction services, facilities management, and fabric construction. The mission of CALCTRA is to "provide incarcerated individuals with life-changing career development opportunities so they may be productive, successful contributors when they return to their communities". The inmates at SCC can earn wages, as well as time off their sentence through the Good Credit Program, while working for CALCTRA to sew fabric necessities, such as uniforms and pillowcases, which are sold state-wide to other facilities within the CDCR umbrella.

An inmate, staff, and public favorite program hosted by SCC is the PUPP program. This program pairs inmates with rescued puppies and dogs and allows them to train the dogs for 12 weeks. The inmates taking part in this program are housed in a separate dormitory, allowing sufficient space for the dogs. The inmates socialize the dogs and teach them basic commands. After the dogs have passed all necessary tests, they are put up for adoption in association with FOAC. The services related to dog training were recently expanded to include a Service Dog program for veterans, which requires the inmates to become certified to train service dogs. Both programs are overwhelmingly successful and popular. The

inmates who take part in these programs report the positive impact it has had on their rehabilitative journey.

On the day of the Grand Jury's tour, it was heavily raining, allowing the unique opportunity to evaluate the condition of the facility's roofs. It was noted that Chapel A had a significant roof leak. There were wet streaks from water that were multiple inches wide, in addition to warping of the baseboard's underneath, indicating a larger issue to fix that may extend as far as damage to the flooring. The wall directly across from the active leak showed obvious signs of previous water damage repairs. Almost all the other facilities toured had no active leaks, although there was plenty of evidence of previous leaks that had been repaired. While touring the CALCTRA warehouse where the sewing program is housed, there were multiple leaks being managed with buckets and signage to use caution. While being shown the newly added fabric construction equipment, a previously unknown leak was pointed out by a Grand Juror, so a new bucket could be put down to catch the droplets. It is important to note that all the buildings in the prison were designed with a flat roof, so leaks are extremely common.

FINDINGS

F1. Water damage due to leaks has the potential to cause future health and safety issues (roof damage, mold, etc.) and damage to facility equipment if not quickly repaired or prevented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. Evaluate maintenance protocols to ensure that roof drainage systems are clear and fully functioning prior to the rainy season. [F1]

COMMENDATIONS

C5. Expansion of the dog training-related programs is extremely beneficial both to the mental health of the inmates but also performs a public service to both the local community members and veteran organizations in providing service dogs to veterans in need.

INVITED RESPONSES

Although not required under Penal Code section 933(c), the following responses are invited within sixty (60) days:

- Joshua Prudhel, Warden, Sierra Conservation Center Finding F1 and Recommendation R1